

The Hidden Dangers of Secret Societies: A Position Paper for the IPHC

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For over a century, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) has maintained a resolute, unwavering resolve against participation in any organization that demands oath-bound allegiance or mandated secrecy. This stance, formalizing the expectation of abdication, recognizes that the path of the believer must be characterized by the light of transparency rather than the shadows of any lodge. While the specific terminology within our governing documents has conviction, abdication remains a foundational pillar of our communal and ministerial life.

According to the IPHC Manual (2022-2026), the church holds a formal expectation that members shall not maintain active membership in, or fellowship with, organizations whose objectives are not in harmony with Scripture, or which require oath-bound commitments that infringe upon their total allegiance to Jesus Christ.¹ This standard ensures that no secondary goal, fraternal bond, or esoteric ritual diverts the believer from the central objective of being approved unto God.²

The IPHC's historical stance is both scripturally warranted and practically necessary in a modern context characterized by increasing religious syncretism and secularism. The IPHC's refusal to condone membership in these orders aligns us with the broader orthodox tradition, including the Assemblies of God, the Catholic Church, and the Greek Orthodox Church, all of whom recognize the inherent spiritual peril in divided loyalties and dangers of participation. True

¹ McGhee, Thomas, Ed. et al. *2022-2026 IPHC Manual*, 132. <https://iphc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/IPHC-Manual-April-1.pdf>

² 2 Timothy 2:15.

Christian discipleship requires a total and public confession of faith, leaving no room for the veiled rituals or hidden indoctrination offered by secret fraternities.³

Theological Foundation I: The Mandate of Transparency and Light

The early Church established a precedent of deep suspicion regarding hidden rites and undisclosed initiations, viewing them as echoes of the pagan mystery cults that permeated the Greco-Roman world. By contrasting the "darkness" of these mystery cults, such as the Eleusinian or Dionysian mysteries, with the "public assembly" of the Church, the Church Fathers prioritized the open proclamation of the Gospel.⁴ Clement of Alexandria explicitly condemned these secret religious fraternities in his work, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, arguing that while their mysteries are shrouded in darkness, the light of Christ requires no such concealment.⁵

The Church is defined not by secret ranks or restricted access, but as an *ekklēsia*, or a public assembly dedicated to the open celebration of God's redemptive work. This theological commitment to transparency finds resonance in the civic sphere. As President John F. Kennedy observed in 1961, "the very concept of secrecy is repugnant to a free people who are historically opposed to secret oaths and proceedings."⁶ Furthermore, Justin Martyr, in his "First Apology" (A.D. 150), asserted that Christ commanded His followers to make no oaths at all but ever to speak the truth.⁷ Similarly, Cyprian of Carthage argued in "On the Unity of the Church" (A.D. 250) that the Church is joined by faith and charity, not bound by oaths or penalties.

³ John 18:20.

⁴ Acts 26:26.

⁵ Clement, A.D. 190.

⁶ John F. Kennedy, *Waldorf-Astoria Hotel*, New York City, Address to the American Newspaper Publishing Association, April 27, 1961.

⁷ Martyr, 22.

There is a crucial distinction between a "society with secrets" (such as the military or a private family) and a "secret society" that utilizes deceptive secrecy to mask its core activities from public and ecclesiastical oversight. The essential question for any believer must be: Why would an organization claiming to promote "good" or "moral discipline" hide its rituals and agendas from the light of public scrutiny? Labeling an order a "society with secrets" is often a rhetorical tool used to soften the organization's image and hide a deeper agenda of deceptive craftiness that is out of alignment with the Word of God.⁸

Theological Foundation II: The Scriptural Prohibition of Unlawful Oaths

Initiation into a secret order often demands a binding oath of secrecy and loyalty, which the IPHC identifies as a spiritually perilous commitment that threatens the believer's moral freedom. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides a rigorous standard for speech, addressing both the content and the ultimate "Judge" of our commitments.⁹ The Greek term "*horkos*" (pronounced hor-koss) refers to a limit, a vow, or a boundary. While not inherently sinful in every historical context, it represents a binding commitment that the believer must treat with extreme gravity.¹⁰ Of greater concern is the Greek term "*omnuó*" (pronounced om-noo-o), which describes the solemn invocation of a higher power to guarantee one's fidelity to a group or a promise.¹¹ To engage in "*omnuó*" is to invite an "overseer" to enforce the consequences of a vow; when this occurs outside the context of God's prescribed order, it becomes a spiritual trap,

⁸ Ephesians 4:14.

⁹ Matthew 5:33-37.

¹⁰ *Strong's Greek: 3727. ὄρκος (Horkos) -- Oath*, biblehub.com/greek/3727.htm. December 12, 2025.

¹¹ *Strong's Greek: 3660. ὀμνύω (Omnuó)*. <https://biblehub.com/greek/3660.htm>. Accessed 22 Dec. 2025.

potentially invoking God's judgment upon a deceptive or frivolous act. This directly violates the third commandment, which forbids taking the Lord's name in vain.¹²

Scripture warns explicitly in Proverbs 20:25 that it is a trap to rashly utter a vow and only afterward consider the implications of that commitment. Jesus commanded His followers to avoid such oaths entirely, instructing that our "Yes" should be "Yes" and our "No" should be "No," for anything more originates from evil. Invoking a "judge of the oath" to protect secrets, which could include criminal, immoral, or unethical behavior, from the light is a perilous act that places a Christian in direct opposition to the biblical mandate for justice and truth-telling.¹³

Categorization of Oaths: Lawful vs. Unlawful Applications

While oaths have existed since the time of the patriarchs, believers must distinguish between civil obligations and the "blood oaths" required of society membership. Lawful oaths are those that align with scriptural precedent. These include areas such as the vows of marriage, military service, and truthful testimony in a court of law. What separates the vow is the purpose behind the oath, in tandem with who is the guarantor of the vow.

For the Christian, marriage constitutes a sacred covenant, while military service and legal testimony serve the interests of public justice and are therefore permissible.¹⁴ The US Military's 1789 provision allowing for a simple "affirmation" instead of a "solemn swear" provides a historic, Quaker-influenced model for how a believer can maintain integrity without violating Christ's commands regarding frivolous oaths.¹⁵ The Boy Scout oath serves as an example of a

¹² This is understood contextually as using His name lightly or falsely in Exodus 20:7.

¹³ Micah 6:8.

¹⁴ Matthew 26:63; Hebrews 6:16.

¹⁵ United States Military oath of enlistment.

non-sinful commitment because its contents are public, it does not involve mandated secrecy, and it does not invoke a binding blood curse or "overseer" to enforce the penalties of oath-breaking. Believers are instructed to evaluate any pledge by its transparency. Commitments requiring one to bind God to a secret agenda as observed in the Masonic Entered Apprentice obligation that mentions, "having my throat cut across," must be rejected as an unlawful and demonic oath. The standard for the believer is clear: all speech must be characterized by the liturgical transparency of the light, rather than the hidden, deceptive penalties of these societies.

The Peril of Divided Allegiance: Submission to the Lodge vs. the Church

Membership in a secret society inevitably creates a conflict of interest, forcing a divided allegiance between the member and the Church, which competes with Christ's Lordship.¹⁶ When a member submits to a governing leadership in secret societies, they enter a hierarchical structure that may directly compete with the authority of their Pastor and the local congregation. A believer cannot serve two masters; if a lodge meeting and a church service conflict, the individual's prior oath to a lodge master often takes precedence over their biblical duty to support their local church.¹⁷

The narrative of Lot in Sodom illustrates the danger of immersion in environments that are not in harmony with God's holiness.¹⁸ Though Lot was personally righteous, his proximity to Sodom, signified by his position at the city gates as a man of civic influence, cost him his

¹⁶ Colossians 1:18.

¹⁷ Hebrews 13:17.

¹⁸ Genesis 18-19.

family's spiritual direction, proving that what a parent tolerates, the children will often embrace.¹⁹

The testimony of John R. Rice in his book, "*Lodges Examined by the Bible*" concerning his father provides a sobering example of the "slippery slope" that leads from innocent curiosity to total immersion in secret orders. Rice's father, once a powerful Baptist minister, saw his spiritual effectiveness destroyed as he prioritized his involvement in the Odd Fellows and Freemasonry, eventually adopting a universalist theology that suggested philosophers like Socrates were saved apart from Christ.²⁰ As James 1:14-15 warns, desire leads to sin, and sin, when full-grown, brings death; secret societies often mask this progression until the believer's ministry is neutralized. Christian believers must remember that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and even a seemingly "frivolous" commitment to a lodge can lead to a spiritual dead end where the interest in missions and evangelism is entirely lost.

The Problem of Universalism and Idolatry

Secret societies are fundamentally built upon the foundation of universalism, seeking to unite men of all faiths (i.e., Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) under a single, non-specific, universal deity. In Freemasonry, for example, God is referenced as the "Great Architect of the Universe." By claiming that the "Light" of their mysteries is the same light found in the Koran or the cult of Mithra, as J.S.M. Ward argues in *Freemasonry and the Ancient Gods*, these organizations promote a "Universal Deity" that is inherently at odds with the God of the Bible.²¹ This "co-mingling" of religious preferences at the lodge altar requires the Christian to suppress

¹⁹ 2 Peter 2:7-9.

²⁰ John R. Rice, *Lodges examined by the Bible: Is it a sin for a Christian to have membership in secret orders?* Murfreesboro, Tenn: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1971.

²¹ J.S.M Ward, *Freemasonry and the Ancient Gods*, (pg. 61-62).

the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ to maintain "harmony." Christians must contrast this inclusive fraternalism with the exclusive declaration of John 14:6, where Jesus asserts that He is the only way to the Father.” Acts 4:12 reinforces that there is salvation in no other name; therefore, to participate in rituals that treat Christ as merely one of many "enlightened" options, alongside Socrates or Allah, is a form of idolatry.

Joining an order that relegates Christ to a "unique possibility" constitutes a violation of both the first and third Commandments, as it honors a generic deity in place of the living Word. A believer cannot honor a universal deity without simultaneously dishonoring the true God who demands exclusive worship.²² Any system that suggests man can improve himself through "moral discipline" or secret degrees without the transformative grace of Christ is a Gnostic deception that must be avoided at all costs.²³

Social and Ethical Concerns: Benevolence as a Mask

Many believers are drawn to secret societies by their public displays of benevolence, mistakenly believing that good works justify the underlying secrecy and deceptive practices. While groups like the Shriners, Hells Angels, and the Elks perform significant charitable acts such as raising significant funding for healthcare and toy drives, the Christian faith maintains that the end does not justify the means.²⁴ The technical reality is that secret societies often use benevolence to build credibility and "mask" their deviant rituals from the public eye. For example, Freemasons possessed an overwhelming majority during the *Engel v. Vitale* case and

²² Exodus 20:3.

²³ Romans 3:23-24; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5.

²⁴ “Annual Report.” *Annual Report | Shriners Children’s*, www.shrinerschildrens.org/en/annual-report.

failed to protect the nation's spiritual interests in the 1962 decision to remove prayer from public schools.

Public "parades" and ceremonies of lodge charity must be contrasted against Jesus' command in Matthew 6:1-4 to perform good works in private, so that the Father who sees in secret may reward. The believer's position is not judgmental in tone, but firm in the wisdom that true ministry seeks to exalt Christ Jesus rather than the reputation of a secret society. Ephesians 5:11 instructs readers to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather to expose them; benevolence should never be used as a cover for participating in organizations that rely on deceptive craftiness. Thus, believers must remain vigilant, knowing that even "angels of light" can use the appearance of humanitarian righteousness to lead the unwary into spiritual bondage.

Historical IPHC Context and Comparative Denominational Analysis

From its earliest documented days in 1902, the IPHC has maintained a clear opposition to secret orders, a stance that has remained consistent throughout its history. A significant driver of this historical opposition was the IPHC's rejection of the racism and elitism inherent in groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), whose white-supremacist ideals were/ remain repugnant to the denomination's commitment to inclusive worship.²⁵ The 1925 General Conference in Franklin Springs, GA, was a watershed moment where every delegate was required to affirm they held no membership in secret societies, specifically to ensure that the KKK had no influence over church leadership. This followed decades of letters to the "IPHC Advocate" (1926, 1928, 1930, etc.)

²⁵ The Ku Klux Klan shortened to the Klan or KKK, is an American Protestant-led white supremacist, far-right hate group. It was founded in 1865 during Reconstruction in the devastated South. The group is typically structured as a secret society containing several different organizations, that have historically resorted to terrorism, violence and acts of intimidation to impose their criteria and oppress their victims, most notably African Americans, Jews, and Catholics. (<https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/kkk-series>).

from members seeking guidance on how to extract themselves from lodges and for guidance on participation and involvement. The 1905 Fire Baptized Holiness Discipline explicitly commanded members by reminding them of the words of Scripture to have no "communion or fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, such as oath-bound secret societies."²⁶ While language has evolved into an "expectation of abdication," the theological core is maintained.

The IPHC's stance is echoed by the Assemblies of God, who advise their ministers to "sever their connections" with worldly secret orders, and the Catholic Church, whose Archbishop Katzer (1895) issued a Pastoral decree forbidding societies that demand blind obedience or rituals that constitute them as "sects."²⁷ The Church of God also emphasizes that such societies contradict Christian spirituality by demanding an allegiance that excludes fellowship in Christ. The United Methodist Church warns that Freemasonry competes with Christianity and may lead a believer to compromise their allegiance to Christ without realizing it. Furthermore, the Greek Orthodox Church Bishops unanimously declared that clergymen who participate in Freemasonry should be "degraded."²⁸ The overwhelming position of the church both in history and currently is clear: secret societies must be avoided by Christians.

Final Practical Guidance for Pastors and Laymen

Moving forward, the IPHC reaffirms its call for all members to maintain a "salt and light" presence in the world without being "of the world."²⁹ Members must not let the "ignorance is bliss" attitude of the secular community dictate spiritual boundaries. This position paper serves

²⁶ Ephesians 5:11

²⁷ Catholic Answers, "Secret Societies," Catholic Answers, February 22, 2019, <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/secret-societies>.

²⁸ IPHC Source Context, 2026.

²⁹ Matthew 5:13-16.

as a pastoral invitation for those currently involved in secret orders, whether for business, connection, or tradition to seek the counsel of their leadership and begin the process of severing those ties.

Both pastors and laypeople are urged to evaluate every commitment through the lens of transparency, ensuring that their influence always points toward the glory of the Father rather than the secrets of the lodge. Discipleship is a journey of total transparency; if a path requires a "veiled" initiation or a "secret" rank, it is not the path of Christ. The focus for all believers should be prioritizing the integrity of speech and the absolute transparency of the Gospel above all non-ecumenical bonds. Let us commit to being a people of the Light, whose "Yes" is "Yes," and whose total allegiance belongs exclusively to Christ Jesus.

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